

Washington State Patrol Media Release

Chief Ronal W. Serpas



Captain Glenn Cramer
Government and Media Relations
(360) 753-5299 – office
(360) 753-5469 – fax
<http://www.wsp.wa.gov>

June 19, 2003

For Immediate Release

Contact: Captain Glenn Gramer or Nelsa Brodie, Public Affairs Officer
(360) 753-5299; OR

Michael Gaffney, Assistant Director, WSU Division of Governmental
Studies and Services
(509) 335-3329

Racial Profiling Study on WSP Released

Over the past 20 months, **over two million** WSP traffic stops were analyzed and studied to determine if racial profiling or biased policing is being practiced by the Washington State Patrol. In a 125-page document delivered to WSP Chief Ronal W. Serpas this week by researchers from Washington State University, the final report findings conclude there is no evidence of a systemic problem with biased policing within the Washington State Patrol.

"The State Patrol is taking the lead in the United States by requesting an outside, objective review of their work," said Nicholas Lovrich, Ph.D., Director of the WSU Division of Governmental Studies and Services. "What we found in our exhaustive study was that there does not appear to be biased policing within the Patrol."

"The State Patrol took a big risk by turning over all their numbers to us and asking us to analyze them," explained Michael Gaffney, J.D., Assistant Director of Governmental Studies and Services, WSU. "There was a lot at stake here for them, because unlike virtually all previous studies of racially coded traffic stop data in other states and urban centers across the country, our analysis of WSP traffic stop data indicates no evidence of biased policing in the rate of driver stops," he said.

The research team, which included Clayton Mosher and Mitch Pickerill, concluded that there are no significant disparities in **stop** rates observed across ethnic/racial classifications of drivers. According to the report, **"These findings are unequivocal and clearly demonstrated – the likelihood of being stopped by the WSP is not affected by the race or ethnicity of drivers on Washington's roads and highways."**

Because the WSP only issues tickets in about 30% of its traffic stops, the WSU team also looked to see whether any one ethnic group was receiving a higher rate of tickets over another. Tested under the rigor of academic analysis, the data clearly demonstrated that the decision of **whether to cite** was likely to be based upon contextual factors such as the seriousness of the violation and the number of offenses observed by the trooper, **not** the

person's race or ethnicity. "Multivariate analyses taking these contextual variables into account confirm that there is no apparent systemic problem with biased policing within the State Patrol at the level of decision to cite," according to the report.

The study also analyzed the **rate of searches**. Because the actual number of searches is quite small (only 3.5% of all traffic stops result in a search), and because the data collection method is still improving, it is not possible to draw complete conclusions at this time. However, according to Gaffney, "There is no indication from the data that there is a systemic, Patrol-wide problem of bias in search decisions. Some questions have arisen with regard to particular APAs¹ which indicate the need for further examination—NOT that there is biased policing in those APAs." Further, "The seriousness of the offense is the best predictor of a search being conducted, for nondiscretionary² as well as discretionary³ searches," WSU says. Nonetheless, race is still an important factor in searches, a factor that will require more study and analysis to determine why this independent variable is still a strong predictor.

"Another noteworthy finding is that while Black drivers, Hispanic drivers, and Native American drivers are more likely to be searched than White drivers, the analysis reported here suggests that this is not the result of officers' use of discretion," the report says. In another result, "This finding of no difference in rate of search of minority drivers between discretionary and nondiscretionary searches suggests that where the WSP officers have the most discretion in choosing to conduct a search, they do not act differently toward different racial groups than when they act with no (or with little) discretion," WSU says. Another finding is that, "the rate of searches in self-initiated contacts is nearly identical to the rate in all contacts. This fact alone would seem to indicate the absence of bias in the decision to search...the rate of discretionary searches in self-initiated contacts is only .05% compared to .08% in all contacts. This finding dispels the argument that troopers target certain motorists for searches prior to the actual contact."

"Biased policing is one of the leading issues facing law enforcement today," explained WSP Chief Ronal W. Serpas. "Law enforcement agencies must earn trust and legitimacy from the communities they serve. To do this, they must confront head-on complex issues such as biased policing." Chief Serpas also said, "We must look at ourselves objectively, and if something needs to be fixed, to fix it. Requesting this outside analysis of our work was, and continues to be, the right thing to do."

Serpas said that while these numbers reflect a very positive image of the WSP, that it will never negate even one person's pain if they felt disrespected. "This study does not mean we are done examining this issue; there is no place in the WSP for biased policing, period," he said. Serpas has an e-mail address for public comment, and if anyone has a concern or complaint about a traffic stop, they may e-mail him at questions@wsp.wa.gov.

In addition to the analysis of the traffic stop data, WSU is also conducting a mail survey throughout Washington State on the overall impression the public has of the State Patrol. This survey is still in progress, but the early numbers indicate that even though the data study indicates the WSP does not practice biased policing, the public perception is that it does.

¹ Autonomous Patrol Areas that are contained within each of the eight patrol districts throughout the state.

² Nondiscretionary searches include: search incident to arrest, impound searches, and warrant searches.

³ Discretionary searches include: consent search, K-9 search, and "Terry Pat Down searches."

"I am a bit disheartened, yet not surprised by these early results. If biased policing is perceived to be practiced in any law enforcement agency, the public tends to perceive it to be pervasive within all of law enforcement," Chief Serpas stated. "Because we know that over 50% of all interaction between the public and the police in this nation results from traffic stops, this type of analysis is critical to help us police America," Serpas added.

In the WSU survey, the question was asked, "Overall, the Washington State Patrol does a good job of performing its mission." Whites, Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans all were over 80% in the categories of agree or strongly agree. According to the WSU preliminary survey report, "Trends in responses over time indicate that the Patrol has not suffered a decline in ratings on these critical indicators despite a marked increase in enforcement activity."

"It is important to note," Gaffney said, "that in the past year, enforcement activities have increased in the Patrol by over 25%. Of equal interest is a corresponding decline in the number of citizen complaints filed against troopers during the same time period." Gaffney further explained, "This flies in the face of indications that as a result of allegations of racial profiling and the collection of data on this issue, disengagement (or de-policing by police officers) may be occurring in some jurisdictions." Serpas added, "I am very proud of our troopers. Depolicing or disengagement is clearly not an issue in the WSP."

However, when the question was asked, "Do you believe that troopers in the WSP engage in profiling when they decide to stop drivers?" the respondents had a much less favorable response. Over 70% of African-Americans, over 60% of Latinos, approximately 40% of Native-Americans and Asians, and 20% of Whites indicated that they believed the WSP is engaged in profiling. Addressing this, the WSU study found, **"Despite the clear evidence that WSP officers are not engaged in biased policing with respect to the stopping of motor vehicles, much of the public believes biased policing is taking place—and this is particularly the case for minority residents in the state."**

"This tells me that we have a lot of work to do in some of our communities throughout the state," Serpas said, "because if even a few people perceive us to be biased, we need to be able to share our experiences to help dispel that myth," he said, adding "the men and women in the Patrol are working hard to promote public safety in a fair and just manner; independent analysis confirms this fact, and I really would like to see them get the recognition they deserve."

"Indicators regarding trooper professionalism, trooper competence, trooper reliability, WSP performance, and overall mission performance continue to demonstrate that the Patrol is widely viewed in a very favorable light by the people of the state," Gaffney explained.

Serpas plans to continue a series of Town Meetings throughout the state in the coming months to solicit feedback from the people of Washington.

To review the WSU Study, you may go to www.wsp.wa.gov. There is a link to the study on the home page.

###